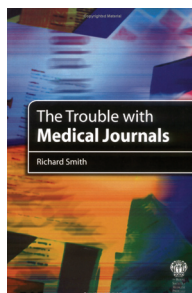


Book Reviews

The Trouble with Medical Journals.

Richard Smith. Royal Society of Medicine Press, London, September 2006. 292pp. £19.95. ISBN: 1853156736.



The only trouble with Richard Smith, for 13 years Editor of the British Medical Journal, is that he writes well but tends to repeat himself. Editors, and ex-editors, are a small group in the medical world, but we like to think we have been influential. This book is a series of stories of Richard Smith's interaction with prospective authors, medical researchers of all sorts, the authorities of the BMA and the public at large. In between these well told stories are his thoughts and concerns for the future of medical journals. After leaving the BMJ he went off to Venice, sat in a palazzo and unburdened himself of all his editorial worries.

In his own words "medical journals have many problems and need reform: over-influenced by the pharmaceutical industry, too fond of the mass media, neglectful of patients. Peer review, the process at the heart of journals and all of science is deeply flawed. The scientific community has not responded adequately to the problem of fraud. And the whole business of medical journals is corrupt because owners are making money from restricting access to important research, most of it funded by public money".

This is heady stuff, but with his racy style and continuous name dropping, any of us who have read medical journals over the years can feel at ease with his thoughts. He ranges over the broad field of medical and scientific publishing, not restricted to the BMJ. We all have our own views on the MMR vaccine crisis, or the tobacco industry, or cancer research, and he is not afraid to be outspoken about these and many other topics that interact with medical journals. He keeps coming back to the substantial profits made by the publishers, who do not have to pay the authors, nor the hapless peer reviewer, and contribute no added value to the educational process. He would like all medical knowledge to be freely distributed throughout the world. Some of it is, but the process is still complex.

The Ulster Medical Journal is well down the list in terms of impact factor, and does not envisage lawsuits or high financial deals – we even have difficulty in getting any support at all from "big pharma". But we do fulfil a purpose – local, academic, informative, and above all to provide a platform for those of us who live and practice medicine in Ulster, to say what we are doing in a formal and ethical manner. The journal is the biggest expense to the Ulster Medical Society, and cannot be said to make a profit. But I think it will go on coming through our letter boxes two, or even three times a year, in well printed paper format, with the familiar blue cover, for a long time in the future. The e-mail and the internet may facilitate urgent matters and take the place of the public

meeting and the telephone, but we still like to read. Maybe the local journal will survive when the big players succumb to globalization.

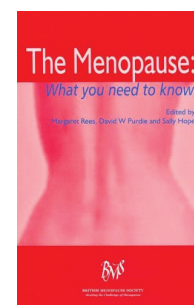
Another way of reacting to this well informed diatribe is to join the opposition, become a medical publisher, and make your fortune! Brendan Bracken, a well known pre-war politician with Irish roots and Churchillian connections had arrived in London penniless after the first world war, but managed to buy the now defunct "Practitioner" for £50,000 in 1928, which became the foundation of his financial empire, culminating in the ownership of the Financial Times and a safe seat in Westminster.

This book is a good read: you can take it lightly, in short chapters, but at the end you will be better informed as well as entertained, both as a reader and as a potential author. You may even decide to join the iconoclasts and cancel all your journal subscriptions!

David R Hadden

The Menopause : What you Need to Know.

Eds: Margaret Rees, David W Purdie & Sally Hope. Royal Society of Medicine Press, London. June 2006. 176pp. £10.95. ISBN: 1853156728.



The British Menopause Society published the 4th Edition of its excellent handbook for health professionals, Management of the Menopause in January 2006. This companion volume has been revised and

updated and is aimed at "the people who actively have to face the menopause and its consequences", namely the patients. This small volume, of just over 100 pages, covers a wide range of issues relating to women's health prior to, during, and after the menopause. The information is unbiased, non promotional and up-to-date. The recent publications from numerous studies on hormone replacement use, and the reaction to these by the media, have generated confusion, if not even hysteria in both the public and some members of the medical profession. The chapter on benefits, risks and controversies goes a long way to addressing the present state of knowledge in the most simple terms. There is a useful chapter on alternative and complementary therapies, which not only discusses the advantages but also the dangers of some of the so-called and commonly used herbal remedies.

Where possible medical language has been avoided, but detailed definitions of words used by health professionals are given. So often a book of this nature is patronizing, but not this one. Doctors can not only recommend this small book, but they should be aware that women who read it will have gained a great deal of knowledge, and this will result in searching questions during a consultation. There are useful sources of information at the end of each chapter, including journal, book and website references; the latter, if sourced, may make an interview even more taxing!

William Thompson